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ABSTRACT

Literature on the background, causes, and current prevalence of competency based programs is synthesized in this report. According to one analysis of the actual and probable costs of minimum competency testing, estimated costs for test development, test administration, bureaucratic structures, and remedial programs for students who cannot pass the exams depend on many variables and show a wide range. (MJL)

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FINANCING COMPETENCY BASED PROGRAMS

by

Annette Daniel, Ed.D.

EA 016 138

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The competency movement is not something new. About 2,000 years ago, attempts were made to cultivate competency in oratory. Various professions all have aimed at making practitioners proficient in their professions. In various fields, tests have been used for entrance, passage from one level to another and certification of competency or proficiency prior to graduation.[1]

Forerunners of this current movement include the Regents Exam, used in New York to determine the competence of individual students and GED tests, designed to measure ability to read and mastery of basic skills. The GED, written at the ninth grade level, are not considered easy. In fact, a GED diploma reportedly has more credence with some employers than a high school diploma.[2]

Another type of competency program is the DODDSUER-PREP (Dept. of Defense Dependents Schools, European Region, Predischarge Education Program. This program operates within the Dept. of Defense to provide instruction for U. S. military personnel attempting to earn high school diplomas.[3]

Employers complain that youth with a high school diploma do not seem able to read, write or do math anymore. Parents, legislators, and other citizens echo their complaints. They cite statistics on declining

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[1]Shirley Boes Neill, The Competency Movement: Problems and Solutions, Education News Service, 1978, p. 7.

[2]Ibid., p. 7.

[3]W. James Popham, "A Competency Based High School Completion Program," NASSP Bulletin, (Fall, 1978): p. 101.

test scores to reinforce demands that schools go "back to basics."[1]

Recently, actions have been taken by legislators, state boards of education, and local school boards which mandate that certain minimum competencies be required before students are either passed on to the next grade or graduated from high school. A major study at the University of Texas showed that one out of five adults tested did not possess the minimum skills needed to cope with the requirements as a citizen in contemporary society.[2]

As a response to this kind of finding, and an increasing confusion and impatience on the part of the American public, politicians and school board members are reviving policies that require that prespecified competencies be demonstrated before promotion or graduation occurs. A recent Gallup poll indicates that by a two to one majority Americans believe the quality of education is declining.[3]

Widespread publicity of declining test scores started about 1973. Receiving the most publicity was a decline in the averages received by high school students on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). The decline in test scores is not limited to SAT. The other widely used college entrance exam, administered by the American College Testing (ACT) Program, shows a comparable decline since the mid 1960s. Unlike the SAT results,

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[1]Shirley Boes Neill, The Competency Movement: Problems and Solutions, Education News Service, 1978, p. 7.

[2]Gordon Cawelti, "Requiring Competencies for Graduation," Educational Leadership, (November, 1977): p. 86.

[3]Ibid., p. 86.

however, ACT scores dropped more in mathematics than in English. Social science showed the largest drop.[1]

Generally, the overall goal expressed in recent mandates is to assure that students reach a minimum level of competency in the basic skills at certain grade levels and prior to being awarded a high school diploma. Most of the mandates specify that student competency or proficiency should be assessed through testing at certain grades in the required basic skills. The mandates specify the use of either statewide or locally developed tests and standards.[2]

Another option used by some states and local districts is to define and require minimum competencies in "survival" or "life skills." They require the application of basic skills to the kinds of problems adults might encounter in daily living. Examples: filling our an application for a driver's license or figuring out the lowest cost per pound.[3]

The Denver Public Schools, the district with the most experience in using minimum competency testing, assesses basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic in academic fashion. It does not include questions testing survival skills. Florida, on the other hand, requires students to be able to perform survival skills like balancing a checkbook. Such skills comprise a functional literacy test that students must pass to graduate.[4]

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[1]Shirley Boes Neill, The Competency Movement: Problems and Solutions, Education News Service, 1978, p. 27.

[2]Ibid., p. 8.

[3]Ibid., p. 8.

[4]Ibid., p. 8.

By the end of the 1970s the majority of states had either passed legislation or adopted state board of education rulings mandating some type of minimum competency testing. In many cases the programs were to be developed by local school districts but in some states they are centrally controlled and statewide competency tests are used. Pupils who fail the tests are given remedial work, and those who fail repeatedly may be given a certificate of attendance rather than a high school diploma.[1]

As of October 1977, 26 states were involved in some form of minimum competency activities. At that time 12 states had legislation on the books and 16 were operating under rulings from the state board of education. The area of most agreement in the various state initiatives is on the need for emphasis on basic skills. Reading is mentioned most often.[2]

Only two states - California and Florida - have legislation enabling students to leave school early upon the attainment of specific skills. California tests student competency with a test developed by its State Department of Education; Florida sought and got approval for use of the GED tests.[3]

Some of the common threads in the legislation and rulings are:

(1) More than a dozen states have minimum competency testing requirements that affect high school graduation.

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[1]Norman E. Gronlund, Measurement and Evaluation in Teaching, MacMillan Publishing Co., 1981, p. 14.

[2]Shirley Boes Neill, The Competency Movement: Problems and Solutions, Education News Service, 1978, p. 41.

[3]Ibid., p. 41.

(2) Grade promotion based on attainment of specific competencies is a feature of legislation or rulings in at least four states: Arizona, Delaware, Florida and Maryland.[1]

Most recently, New York has initiated a more rigorous set of competency standards than the previous standards. The new standards will begin with the graduating class of 1981. Florida's competency program was delayed until the 1982-83 school year to ensure that all students were properly prepared to take the test on equal footing.[2]

Little attention has been paid to the increased costs resulting from legislation that mandates testing of minimum competencies and remediation of students who cannot pass competency requirements. More accurately, little attention has been paid by the public and by the media. School personnel are well aware that additional requirements and regulations always cost more money.[3]

How much more is anyone's guess. Little is known about the actual and probable costs. One analysis of costs, prepared by Barry D. Anderson of Washington University, St. Louis, pinpoints costs in four areas: test development, test administration, bureaucratic expenses and costs for compensatory (remediation) programs.[4]

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[1]Shirley Boes Neill, The Competency Movement: Problems and Solutions, Education News Service, 1978, p. 41.

[2]The 1980 World Book Year Book, World Book-Childcraft Int'l., 1980, p. 302.

[3]Shirley Boes Neill, The Competency Movement: Problems and Solutions, Education News Service, 1978, p. 82.

[4]Ibid., p. 82.

Test development costs: Such costs are nil, Anderson says, if existing standardized tests fit legislative requirements and are adopted by the state or district. But many states and districts have opted to develop their own tests--which means items must be written or selected. They must be tested on small samples of students, then revised and put in final form. The cost per item is between $25 and $219 with the average about $100, says Anderson.[1]

Total cost of development depends on the number of items selected and the number of grades in which measurement takes place. If a district, for example, decides to measure five criteria in reading and five in math (using 10 items to measure each criteria), the development costs could range from under $10,000 to over $60,000. That's assuming that measurement takes place one time each in elementary, junior and senior high schools. The estimates do not take into account the cost for developing alternative forms of the test, for making annual revisions of it, nor for making a highly sophisticated instrument, that is, one with more than a minimum number of items and one given more than pilot testing.[2]

Test administration: The Denver school district reported to Anderson that its cost to administer a minimum competency test was 15¢ per pupil per administration. In statewide testing, the total cost for test administration depends on whether the state prints, mails, scores and reports the results itself or hires an outside contractor to do so.

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[1]Shirley Boes Neill, The Competency Movement: Problems and Solutions, Education News Service, 1978, p. 82.

[2]Ibid., p. 82.

In the former case, figures obtained by Anderson indicate that the cost ranges from 50¢ to $1.55 per pupil. When a contractor is used, he says, the cost ranges from $1 to $13 per pupil. The larger figure is for a "secure" test, that is, one for which special precautions are taken to guarantee secrecy of test content. Anderson believes minimum competency tests should be secure, since the outcome could determine whether or not a student receives a diploma.[1]

Bureaucratic expenses: Anderson reports mainly on bureaucratic expenses at the state level. But it is not inconceivable that new or modified bureaucratic structures at the local level could result to handle state mandated minimum competency requirements. When bureaucratic structures are added--at the state or local level--the cost could be high. Anderson says the costs of running a statewide testing program ranges from $65,000 to $945,000 annually.[2]

Compensatory programs: This is the "great hidden cost in competency based programs," says Anderson. First, he notes, fairly large numbers of students--20 to 50%--may fail competency examinations. Secondly, those who fail will probably be the urban poor. (Experience shows that trying to make education "work" for such students can be very costly and involve many "social" costs, e.g. providing free meals, work/study programs with pay, health costs, family assistance.) Bringing all students up to a mastery level, says Anderson, could mean spending more

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[1]Shirley Boes Neill, The Competency Movement: Problems and Solutions, Education News Service, 1978, p. 82.

[2]Ibid., p. 82

money (for smaller classes, materials, aides); spending more time on the targeted areas, such as the basic skills, at the expense of other areas of the curriculum; or, perhaps, making a political decision to lower the minimum competency level.[1]

Total costs to districts will depend on many variables. Even estimates are difficult to make. As one illustration, however, Anderson notes that the cost to three Oregon districts in attempting to meet that state's competency graduation requirements ranged from $26,500 to $173,200.[2]

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[1]Shirley Boes Neill, The Competency Movement: Problems and Solutions, Education News Service, 1978, p. 82.

[2]Ibid., p. 82.

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